



INDIVISIBLE

Daniel Webster and the Birth of American Nationalism
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A Conversation with Joel Richard Paul about *INDIVISIBLE: The Birth of American Nationalism*

Q. Who was Daniel Webster, and why does he matter?

A. Ralph Waldo Emerson called Daniel Webster “the completest man.” Born in New Hampshire during the American Revolution, Webster grew up to be an influential congressman, senator, secretary of state, and presidential candidate and was at the center of American politics from 1812-1852 when the United States was struggling to determine the kind of nation it wanted to be. He fought slavery, Andrew Jackson, and American expansionism. He argued some of the most famous cases before the Supreme Court and earned the reputation as the “defender of the Constitution.” As secretary of state, Webster skillfully averted a third war with Britain. Perhaps most important, Webster was universally acknowledged as the greatest orator of the age, celebrated throughout Europe as well as the United States.

Q. How does Webster’s legacy resonate today?

A. We are living in a time of hostility to democratic values, pluralism, and immigration. Extreme partisanship has paralyzed Congress and infected the Supreme Court, undermining its legitimacy. Webster, too, lived in a deeply polarized time that threatened the Union. Still, he believed in the possibility of finding consensus, and his rhetoric and ideas appealed to Americans’ faith in our nation’s founding. In the process, Webster defined what it meant to be an American.

Q. What did it mean to be an American at the beginning of our republic?

A. The least self-evident truth in our Declaration of Independence were the words, “United States.” People considered themselves Virginians or New Yorkers, not Americans. We were divided by region, ethnicity, faith, and race. Our national identity did not begin to take hold until sometime after the War of 1812, more than three decades after the Declaration was signed.

Q. How did we become “American” then?

A. During the period from 1820 to 1850 competing ideas of American identity were put forth by men like Henry Clay, John Quincy Adams, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John O’Sullivan, Walt Whitman, and Andrew Jackson. Some argued that the land made us

American, that we were destined to occupy the whole continent, and that tribal nations were mere obstacles to our development. Others argued that our nation was defined by race, and there was no room for Mexicans or African Americans in a white America. Against this populist, expansionist, and racist argument, Webster popularized the idea that it was the Constitution that made all Americans one nation indivisible, regardless of race, ethnic origin, or faith. While the Union was unraveling, our national identity was taking shape. By the time the Civil War erupted in 1861, Webster's vision of constitutional nationalism defined Americans.

Q. What's Daniel Webster's significance in American history?

A. Webster's passionate and lifelong defense of the Union shaped the thinking of the men who waged the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln modeled his speeches on Webster's, and many of his most memorable lines were chosen from Webster. The generation that fought the Civil War were taught in grade school to recite portions of Webster's speeches extolling the virtue of the Union. Webster's most famous line, "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable" inspired the Union's resolve to defeat the secessionists. Even in civil war, we were now all "Americans."

Q. What kind of man was Webster?

A. Webster was complicated. He was a brilliant orator, a passionate patriot, and a deeply flawed man. He could speak extemporaneously for hours in prose that was sheer poetry. In an age of great orators, even his rivals admitted that no one was his equal. But Webster had a dark shadow. He lived extravagantly, far beyond his means, and depended on the generosity of wealthy businessmen who in turn relied on him to support tariffs that favored their industries. He was tainted by unfounded gossip and sexual scandal, and in his later years, he drank to excess. After he endorsed the Compromise of 1850, he was vilified by his friends and died a broken man.

Q. Why did Webster's support for the Compromise of 1850 destroy his political career?

A. Webster was an eloquent and impassioned opponent of slavery and a staunch defender of the Union. In 1850, California sought statehood, but the South did not want to admit another free state to the Union and threatened to secede. Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky approached Senator Webster with a proposed compromise that included the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which would compel the North to return fugitive slaves. Webster was torn between his hatred of slavery and his love of the Union. He understood that endorsing the fugitive slave law would cost him support in New England and end his political career, but his support would be critical to persuading other northern Whig senators to back the compromise. In the end, Webster was persuaded there was no other way to save the Union. His friends and supporters turned against him. Emerson wrote that "the word liberty in the mouth of Mr. Webster sounds like the word love in the mouth of a courtesan." And John Greenleaf Whittier penned a

poem titled "Icarus," in which he wrote that "When faith is lost when honor dies, The man is dead!"

Q. If there had been no compromise, what would have happened?

A. Without the fugitive slave law, the South would likely have seceded in 1850, it would have fallen to President Millard Fillmore, rather than Lincoln, to defend the Union. Though the Compromise only succeeded in holding the Union together for a decade, during that time three important developments occurred. First, the abolitionist movement gained strength in the North. Second, the North's armaments industry dramatically outpaced the South assuring that the North would have a military advantage over the South. Third, a whole generation of men who went on to fight the Civil War were indoctrinated in the belief that "Liberty and Union" were inextricably bound together. Webster's rhetoric forged the resolve to defend the Union. By postponing the Civil War, the Compromise of 1850 likely saved the Union.

Q. How is this book relevant to our present day?

A. Once again issues of race and national identity are dividing us. Finding consensus seems impossible, and the institutions of government are losing legitimacy. Our political leaders are failing the test of whether to put the country before party and their own political ambition.

Daniel Webster's story demonstrates that even in these dark times of division it is possible for people of good faith to find common ground. Webster reminds us that despite our differences, the Constitution made us one nation indivisible.